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SUBJECT: (U) Deputy Secretary Steinberg's February 11,
2009 meeting with UK Ambassador Nigel Sheinwald

CLASSIFIED BY EUR ASSISTANT SECRETARY DANIEL FRIED, FOR
REASONS 1.4 (D)

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Deputy Secretary Steinberg and UK Ambassador Sheinwald met on February 11 for 40 minutes. On Afghanistan, the Deputy Secretary said the USG was reviewing its policy and wanted to develop a strategy that was sustainable. He cautioned against the UK proposal to push back Afghan elections because of the power vacuum it would create. The Deputy noted the recent, encouraging statements from Tehran, but indicated the administration was still reviewing its posture towards Iran. On the Israeli election, the Deputy Secretary said the closeness of the election would pose challenges to hold onto control for whoever emerged victorious. Both the Deputy Secretary and Sheinwald welcomed Russia's statements at the Munich Security Conference. On bilateral issues, Sheinwald asked the U.S. to expeditiously process Binyam Mohammed from Guantanamo because of intense domestic pressure. He also asked the U.S. to continue consultations with Her Majesty's Government (HMG) on the possible prison transfer of Pan Am Bomber Megrahi. Finally, responding to Sheinwald's question about whether the U.S. intended to reconsider its opposition to participation in the UN Human Rights Council, the Deputy said the US was reviewing the issue. END SUMMARY.

Afghanistan

¶2. (S/NF) The Deputy Secretary stated that overall Afghanistan policy was under review and added it was important to "get it right" and have a sustainable plan as this administration had inherited a "strategically confused approach." Sheinwald asked if the U.S. was likely to increase its numbers in Afghanistan and what level of burden-sharing was expected. Sheinwald suggested that nations not willing to contribute more troops should be encouraged to support training programs as they will be vital in achieving any long-term success in the country. The Deputy agreed, but stating that he didn't want to prejudge the president, cautioned that while a short-term troop increase was possible, it was too early to speculate on long-term commitments. Furthermore, the U.S. wanted to be certain that when it made its "asks," that there both be a genuine need for the request, and the ability for the donor country to deliver.

¶3. (S/NF) On elections, the Deputy said there were worries about how the pending delay until August might affect President Karzai's legitimacy. He said President Karzai appeared to be indecisive and unprepared for other candidates to come forward. The Deputy made clear the

U.S. was concerned about a possible UK initiative to further delay the elections until next year.

IRAN

¶4. (S/NF) Sheinwald asked about current USG thinking on engaging Iran, particularly in light of President Ahmedinajad's recent comment that Iran was ready to talk to the United States. The Deputy Secretary noted the U.S. was receiving conflicting advice on how to proceed, specifying that the P3 was divided on whether they believed the U.S. should engage Iran before their June elections. France and Germany were urging caution, while the UK believed engagement should not wait. The Deputy said that the administration was still reviewing its options.

RUSSIA

¶5. (S/NF) On Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov's speech in Munich, Sheinwald said the UK and other European countries saw it as a positive sign that Russia was ready to properly re-engage with the U.S. and the West. The Deputy Secretary agreed the speech was welcomed in the United States. He noted that Under Secretary Burns was in Moscow now for the "first touches" and added that the Secretary would soon meet Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov.

ISRAELI ELECTIONS

¶6. (S/NF) Sheinwald probed for early USG reaction to the Israeli election and what effect it could have on peace initiatives. The Deputy said the closeness of the results could lead to uncertainty as whoever emerges will immediately be vulnerable. It was important for Israel to get a government in place since the opportunity of Special Envoy Mitchell's role might be undermined. The Deputy held that it was better to have a "difficult partner" than to have no partner. When asked if Israeli PM Olmert was likely to undertake any last-minute initiatives, the Deputy said such moves would be unlikely to have much impact and could be counterproductive as Olmert had little political or moral standing in the country.

Guantanamo/Binyam Mohammed

¶7. (S/NF) Turning to bilateral matters, Sheinwald pleaded for expeditious handling of the Binyam Mohammed case, as it was drawing a lot of attention in the UK. Sheinwald explained that Mohammed was on the verge of release to the UK under the previous administration, but now his case was under review along with all others. "We can help you get him out," he said, adding that swift handling of this detainee release would likely be favorably viewed by European governments weighing decisions on detainee resettlement. The Deputy confirmed he would take this on-board, noting the formal detainee review process was still ongoing, but in an encouraging word said that if the previous administration had been on the verge of allowing it, it was difficult to imagine it would be harder now.

LIBYAN PRISONER TRANSFER

¶8. (S/NF) Sheinwald asked that the U.S. continue to consult with the UK in the possible transfer of ailing Pan Am bomber Abdel-Basset al-Megrahi from the UK to Libya. Specifically, he said HMG supported the discussions this week between UK and U.S. officials to define a common

strategy. Sheinwald cited concern that the Pan Am victims' families were asking for direct U.S. intervention to stop the transfer. He asked that the United States delay "for a few days" any intervention with the Scottish authorities, who ultimately will decide on the transfer. The Deputy said the UK government needed to understand the sensitivities in this case, and noted he was acutely aware of concerns of the Lockerbie victims' groups from his previous time in government.

U.S./UK Defense Treaty

¶9. (S/NF) Sheinwald inquired about the status of the Defense Trade treaty's passage, as he understood there was support for it in the previous administration, but that it had died in the last Senate session because of other priorities taking precedence and pre-election politicization. The Deputy assured that in principle, the State Department supported the treaty and wanted it to go forward at the appropriate time.

UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

¶10. (S/NF) Sheinwald inquired whether the U.S. was ready to join the UN Human Rights Council. The United Kingdom was aware of the flaws of the Council, he asserted, but have determined it is more useful to be engaged rather than outside the system. The Deputy responded that the USG was committed to reaching a decision soon, but needed to lay the groundwork so that any decision would be sustainable. Sheinwald noted UK Minister of State Mark Malloch-Brown had spoken to USUN Permanent Representative Susan Rice on this issue.

UPCOMING MEETINGS, VISITS

¶11. (C) The Deputy asked for close consultation on the April London Economic Summit, and said the U.S. hoped for early guidance on participation. Sheinwald also confirmed the UK had asked for a PM Brown-POTUS meeting in Washington, but had not received an affirmative response yet. On the possibility of a Foreign Minister and/or Defense Minister meeting ahead of the NATO summit, the two agreed the UK and U.S. should remain in close contact. However, Sheinwald did mention the French had expressed their opposition to an ISAF ministers meeting in Strasbourg.

¶12. (U) Participants:

United States
Deputy Secretary Steinberg
EUR - Pamela Spratlen
EUR/WE - Zia Syed (notetaker)
D Staff - Mary Sue Conaway

United Kingdom

¶13. (U) MINIMIZE CONSIDERED.

Ambassador Nigel Sheinwald
Simon Shercliff, UK Embassy First Secretary

CLINTON